

DAILY BIBLE READING GUIDE

Kingdom lifestyle

Matthew 4-5



STPETERSTAMWORTH

Kingdom lifestyle

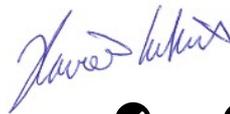
Living differently

Jesus has come to bring in God's kingdom. It is a kingdom that is not of this world and its members therefore live differently. The beatitudes start to describe what this life is like. It is the 'blessed' life, it is the life that God esteems and it sets the members of God's kingdom apart from those whose lifestyle is centred around this world which is passing away. My prayer is that you will grow in your understanding of what it means to be blessed and to live according to Jesus' kingdom values.

- Set aside time (15-30 minutes) in your day to meditate on the passages proposed and to talk to your Lord. You can tick off the days you have done as you work through these. If you are married, you could do this with your spouse each morning as you start your day.

These verses will also be part of the sermon series and studied in more depth in our Growth Groups in first term. Using this guide will be a good way for you to get more out of Growth Groups and Church gatherings and will help you to be a blessing to others.

Yours sincerely, Xavier



	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Week of 25-29th January					
Week of 1st-5th February					
Week of 8th-12th February					
Week of 15-19th February					
Week of 22st-26th February					
Week of 1st-5th March					
Week of 8th-12th March					
Week of 15th-19th March					
Week of 22nd-26th March					

Day 1

This is the king of the kingdom

READ: Matthew 3.13-17

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptised by him. But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptised by you, and yet you come to me?” Jesus answered him, “Allow it for now, because this is the way for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Then John allowed him to be baptised. When Jesus was baptised, he went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.””

REFLECT: Welcome to our series on the kingdom lifestyle. Next week we will dive into what it means to be part of this kingdom, but first we must be introduced to God’s king, the king of the kingdom. We will reflect on the beginning of Jesus’ ministry this week.

- Why do you think Jesus had to be baptised?
- What does God say about Jesus at his baptism and what do you think is significant about that?

You might find it curious that Jesus got baptised. People often associate baptism with conversion and turning away from sin. These are two things that Jesus never needed to do. However to be baptised by John was also a way of identifying with and accepting John’s prophetic message. John spoke about God’s kingdom arriving and therefore he spoke about the arrival of God’s king. If you accepted this message you got baptised. The Pharisees who opposed Jesus did not accept John’s message and therefore didn’t get themselves baptised by him. Jesus however identifies with God’s purposes and with God’s people who waited expectantly for the kingdom to come. These reasons made it fitting and right that he got baptised.

Secondly did you notice God’s declaration about Jesus at his baptism? God declares two things:

- 1) That Jesus is his beloved son
- 2) That he is well pleased with him

These two declarations refer to two extremely important figures in the Old Testament. To be God’s son, means to be God’s king. In other words Jesus is the messiah or the Christ (see Psalm 2). The reference to God being pleased with him is a reference, not to the king, but to the great suffering servant of the Lord from Isaiah (See Isaiah 42.1).

God is outlining for us at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry who he is. He is the eternal king of God’s eternal kingdom and he is the great servant of the Lord who will serve by suffering. Jesus is both saviour and Lord. To treat him as saviour is to trust that he served you by dying in your place for your sins. To treat him as Lord is to obey him as your king. To be part of God’s kingdom means relating to Jesus in both of these ways, as Lord and saviour.

- How are you going in treating Jesus as God intends you to?

PRAY: Thank-you heavenly Father for revealing to me who Jesus is as the king of your kingdom and also as the servant who served me by dying in my place. Help me to treat Jesus as he is. To trust him for my salvation and to obey him as my king. Amen

READ: Matthew 4.1-11

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. Then the tempter approached him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” He answered, “It is written: **Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.**”

Then the devil took him to the holy city, had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: **He will give his angels orders concerning you, and they will support you with their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.**”

Jesus told him, “It is also written: **Do not test the Lord your God.**”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. And he said to him, “I will give you all these things if you will fall down and worship me.”

Then Jesus told him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: **Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.**”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and began to serve him.”

REFLECT: To test something is a way to reveal its quality. To test a car is to see whether it meets its design criteria. To test a marathon runner is to see whether they have what it takes to go the distance. To be tested as a human being, reveals all sorts of character traits which are deep within.

- In what ways was Jesus tested?
- What was the devil trying to do?
- How did Jesus meet the test?
- In what ways has God put you to the test in your personal life? How have you gone?

If you are like me you will know what it is like to have your character exposed under test; Snapping at a loved one when you are tired; Indifference concerning the salvation of people who give you a hard time; Temptation to love the things of this world rather than seeking God's kingdom first. **Continued below...**

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Being tested isn't pleasant and it reveals weaknesses in us due to our sin. God's people of old were tested by God in the wilderness. During 40 years life was hard and they failed many times. However when tested like God's people - notice the symbolic number 40 referring to the wilderness wanderings - Jesus stood the test. He continued to trust God and he drew on God's word to stand firm under the test. The great news is that, thus far in Matthew's Gospel, we have a king who is up to the test. The greatest test will come when Jesus is faced with the cross and again he will remain obedient to his father even unto death. Here is God's king who will be able to help us when we are tested and forgive us when we fail.

- Is God testing you in your life at the moment? How are you drawing on God's word to stand firm under the test? To what extent are you asking Jesus to help you?

PRAY: Heavenly Father I thank you for your son my saviour Jesus Christ who, when put to the test by you, continued to trust and obey you. Lord when I am tested help me to trust you like Jesus and obey you and please forgive me for times when I have failed. Amen

READ: Matthew 4.12-17

“When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.””

REFLECT: John’s public ministry comes to an end and Jesus’ public ministry begins.

- What did Jesus do when he heard that John the Baptist was put in prison?
- Jesus left his family home to live in Capernaum, in Galilee. What does this fulfil according to Matthew?
- Like John the Baptist, Jesus began to preach. What was his message?

The lake region of Galilee is where Jesus took up residence having left Nazareth - the place of his upbringing. The region of Galilee is described as a place of great darkness (Isaiah 9.1-7). This is where Jesus began his public ministry. Galilee has about as much sunlight as Tamworth, therefore it is not physical darkness that is being referred to but spiritual darkness. These people lived under the shadow of death. Yet in the presence of Jesus they have seen a great light. Here is the one who will bring people out of darkness into life!

When we connect the dots like this we realise that all people in all places live in great darkness. Death is an inescapable shadow that hangs over every single human being, yourself included. Matthew announces to you the great hope that the shadow of death can be overcome in this one who is a great light.

Did you also notice the hints to the character of this darkness that people live under. Firstly John the Baptist was put in prison by king Herod for preaching the truth. In Jesus’ day people lived under the rule of one who did not uphold the truth and as a result injustice prevailed. How often is human rule like this still today? Did you also notice that Jesus’ message was to call people to repent? In order for people to enter God’s kingdom they needed to acknowledge that they hadn’t always lived by God’s truth themselves. Finally, if John the Baptist was put into prison for preaching the truth, Matthew prepares us, as readers, for what will happen to Jesus who preached the same message. He will die for proclaiming the truth, yet that truth can set us free.

PRAY: Dear heavenly Father, in a world where death is a reality I can’t escape and where injustice often prevails, I thank you for Jesus who is the great light, who preached the truth of your kingdom and who can bring me into the light of life. Please help me to turn away from the lie which ignores you as Lord and to live for Jesus as king. Help me to proclaim the truth about you even if that might be costly. Amen.

Day 4

Fishermen for the kingdom

READ: Matthew 4:18-22

“While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

REFLECT:

- What strikes you about Jesus’ calling of his first disciples?

So far in Matthew’s gospel we know that Jesus is God’s king and also the great suffering servant. We know that he has resisted in the face of temptation where God’s people had failed. And we know that Jesus has come, like John the Baptist, announcing the nearness of God’s kingdom. These are momentous things. When Jesus calls the first disciples Matthew describes them as responding to Jesus’ call without hesitation. We find this surprising. These men left the only profession they knew. A father in those days would love his son by showing him everything he knew and sharing with him his knowledge of life. Yet Jesus’ call of these men surpassed the relationship of father and son and set these men on a different trajectory for their lives. Jesus was going to make them ‘fishers of men’. He was to train them, to teach them, to model for them things of the kingdom. However, it wasn’t the role of being fishers of men which came first, it was the call to relationship with Jesus which came first. ‘Follow me’ Jesus said! And so it is if we are to be those who God uses to bring others in his kingdom, we need to follow him first.

PRAY: Dear heavenly Father, I find it extraordinary that men like Peter and John left their professions to follow you and be transformed by you. It reminds me that you are the God of the extraordinary, with great authority and can bring people into your kingdom. Help me to follow you, to learn from you, to grow in knowing you that you might use me for the building of your eternal kingdom. Amen

Day 5

The kingdom and the crowds

READ: Matthew 4:23-25

“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them.

And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

REFLECT: If you are young, your body may need no healing, what a marvellous blessing - thank God for that! Yet as you grow older all sorts of things will happen to your body which will cause you frustration, perhaps pain and grief.

- What do we see Jesus doing in this passage and what results?

It would have been wonderful to have been healed by Jesus’ authority. It is not surprising that huge crowds started to follow him! Unfortunately there are some people today that give false hope proclaiming that God will heal us if only we have enough faith. The reality is that our bodies will only be free from affliction in the eternal kingdom of God. What we see here is the glory of the kingdom which broke in a little while, while the king of the kingdom was on earth. It’s like a foretaste of heaven to come. The greatest need Jesus came to deal with was our need of forgiveness. This must be dealt with first. It is the relationship that needs healing first and when that is fixed we can have the hope of receiving new bodies in his presence.

PRAY: Dear heavenly Father, I want to thank you for the hope of the glory of your kingdom to come. Amen

WEEK of 1st-5th February

Day 1	The blessed life of the kingdom
<p>READ: Matthew 5.1-3</p> <p>“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.</p> <p>He said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.””</p>	<p>REFLECT: Jesus has began his ministry and called his disciples. He now sits down and does the first ‘discipleship training session’ with them. He begins to teach them what it means to live as subjects and participants in God’s kingdom. One thing which will stand out in his teaching on this mountain is that Jesus’ disciples are to be different to the world around them. They are to have a lifestyle radically distinct from those who do not know God. This lifestyle is ‘blessed’. It is the lifestyle of the one God esteems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider this first ‘blessing’, what strikes you about it? • What do you think it might mean? • Do you see yourself as being poor in spirit? In what way? <p>The eight ‘blessings’ at the beginning of Jesus’ teaching on the mountain describe not different people, but one person, the person who has found true life. Jesus’ teaching is focussed on his disciples, but at the end of the teaching, in chapter 7, we discover that the crowds were also listening in. Each week we will unpack one aspect of what it means to be part of God’s kingdom and what it means to be ‘blessed’. This week we will focus on what it means to be ‘poor in spirit’ for those who are like this possess the kingdom. What an extraordinary thought.</p> <p>PRAY: Lord Jesus, it is surprising that the person who is a member of your kingdom is poor, and poor in spirit. I want to learn what this means. Please help me to understand that in your kindness I might live this ‘blessed’ life for your glory. Amen</p>
Day 2	Blessed are the poor in spirit /
<p>READ: Matthew 5.3</p> <p>Jesus said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”</p> <p>READ: 1 Samuel 2:7-8</p> <p>“The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.</p> <p>He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: Who wants to be poor financially? Genuine material poverty can be a crushing and humiliating experience. Yet Jesus seems to think that poverty is a desirable state. He is certainly not talking about material poverty but being <i>poor in spirit</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What light does the reading from 1 Samuel throw on this subject? What does God do for the poor? <p>God in his sovereignty gives wealth and he takes it away. Being poor isn’t a more desirable state than being wealthy and being wealthy isn’t necessarily wrong. However it is often those who are materially rich who forget they are dependent on God and who become arrogant. Those who are poor tend to trust God, for who else do they turn to in their need? Pride and self-sufficiency is an illusion and a lie. Fundamental to our relationship with God is our dependence on him. He gives us all things and the one who God esteems depends on him whether they are materially rich or poor.</p> <p>PRAY: Heavenly Father, forgive me for times when I have not depended on you. Please help me to have the humility to acknowledge that everything I possess comes from your hand. Amen</p>

Day 3

Blessed are the poor in spirit II

READ: Matthew 5.3

Jesus said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

READ: Isaiah 61.1-7

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.”

REFLECT: God blessed his people of old with great material prosperity. King David brought peace from the enemies surrounding them and Solomon his son ushered in a golden era of wealth. It was short lived! Israel ignored their God, turned away from his ways, and used their wealth to self centred ends (see Isaiah 9.4-10.4). As a result, God in his anger made them poor. He sent them as captives into a foreign land. The prophet Isaiah considers the sorry state of God’s people.

- What state are God’s people in?
- What does God promise to do?
- In what ways might your life be like that of Israel of old?

Israel had become poor because of their rebellion against their good God. They had ignored him and become self sufficient following their own ways, rather than his word. Their poor state, reflected their spiritual poverty. They needed help and they needed restoration. God in his kindness promised to free them from captivity and to enable them to experience his blessing again.

There is a parallel here for every person who comes to Christ. Without the Lord we are in a most poor and pitiful state. We are captive to sin and living in spiritual darkness. We need God to intervene, to show us undeserved favour and to restore us to himself. If you know the grace of God in Christ and the freedom he has won for you, take this time to pray for a person who doesn’t know the Lord yet. Pray that they might know of their poor spiritual state and that God in his kindness might bring them to salvation.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank you for freeing me from the captivity of my sin. Thank you for showing grace to me a sinner. Please work in the life of _____ that they might grasp their poor spiritual state, might turn to you and find the riches of eternal life. Amen

Day 4

Blessed are the poor in spirit III

READ: Matthew 5.3

Jesus said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

READ: 2 Corinthians 8:9

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

REFLECT: When someone gives up something of value to themselves for your sake, you know they care for you. Can you think of a time when you became poorer out of your love for someone else?

- What has the Lord Jesus done for you?
- What are the riches he gave up for you?
- What does this tell you about God’s love for you?

Jesus came from a ‘middle class’ family. Being a carpenter put him in this category. Yet when he became an itinerant preacher and moved around with his disciples, his material wealth decreased. Jesus said, “*Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*” This path he chose would lead him to becoming poor on the cross. He left the joy, comfort and splendour of being in his Father’s presence to take up the poverty of our condemnation. He did this so that we might be rich.

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He who had no sin became sin for us so that we might become God's dearly loved children. That is why those who acknowledge and confess their spiritual poverty, their sin, and trust in the work of Christ are those who have become rich. They have received the gift of the promised Holy Spirit, they are God's children and they await to be in God's presence, in the splendour of his glory. This is why the beatitudes begin with those who are spiritually poor. To face up to our sin before God, to seek forgiveness and to find the riches of grace and love in Christ is to be given the kingdom.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank you that through your poverty in the Lord Jesus, I have become rich. What amazing love you have for me, what extraordinary generosity to me a sinner. Please help me to reflect your love and generosity in the way I treat my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and others you call me to love. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.3

Jesus said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

READ: Matthew 6.19-21, 24

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

REFLECT: As Australians we probably like to think of ourselves as middle-class. It is always easy to find other people around us who are more wealthy. Yet on a global scale we are amongst the richest people on the planet. We are brought up to believe, "Blessed are the wealthy and powerful for theirs is the kingdom on this earth!"

- What does Jesus exhort us to do?
- What do you think putting into practice Jesus' words means for you?
- Where is your heart?

It is very hard to long for God's kingdom when we are rich and comfortable. It is hard for us to grow in trust when we have all we need. In fact one of the churches in the book of revelation thought they were rich, but they were actually poor, wretched, blind and naked. Oh how our riches can blind us to our spiritual poverty!

The antidote to depending on riches is to be generous with what God has given us. Giving is a characteristic of God. As we give it helps us to depend on him, it helps us to realise what we have come from him in the first place, it helps us to grow in love and it helps us to put our hope in God's kingdom and not in this world. Being generous then is a way to grow in our christian walk.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, you have placed me in a land of great abundance. Thank you for the material riches I enjoy. You know Father I am tempted to always look to those who have more than me and I am tempted to covet their lifestyle. Please help me to resist the lie of this temptation, for true riches are to be found in relationship with you. Help me therefore heavenly Father to grow to be more like you. Help me even this week to see how I might be generous in giving to others and giving of my time for your kingdom. Amen

WEEK of 8th-12th February

Day 1

Blessed are those who mourn I

READ: Matthew 5.4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

READ: Luke 2.25-26

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation...”

REFLECT: What a strange thing it is that Jesus says that those who mourn are blessed. The clue to understanding what he is saying is to dive in the Old Testament like we did with the first beatitude. Simeon was an old man who needed consolation. In some ways he was one who mourned. He wasn’t mourning at a funeral but he was mourning for the state of his people.

- Do you have any idea of what might have caused his grief?
- How does his grief find consolation?

Simeon is a classic example of a godly man who mourns and who needed consolation. There is one overwhelming event for God’s people in the Old Testament which was the cause of mourning. It was the exile. God’s people were banished from the presence of their God, banished from their homeland, had to live under the culture and rule of unbelievers and many of them longed for the day when God would bring his salvation. In the meditations that will come this week, we will be reflecting on a characteristic that is true for all Christians. We mourn!

- In what ways as a Christian do you feel grief when you consider the state of this world and those around you who don’t acknowledge the Lord?

PRAY: Heavenly Father, I grieve to see sin in my own life, I grieve to see the injustice and suffering so prevalent amongst people. I grieve when death comes to those whom I know. Thank you that you are a God of consolation. Thank you for the consolation you bring through the hope we have in the Lord Jesus, help me Father to point others who grieve to hope we can have in the Lord Jesus our consolation. Amen

Day 2

Blessed are those who mourn II

READ: Matthew 5.4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

READ: Lamentations 1.1-4

“How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies. After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place. All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed festivals. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her young women grieve, and she is in bitter anguish...”

REFLECT: One of the most popular songs the band REM produced is called, ‘Everybody hurts.’ Millions of people relate to that song for it brings some comfort to know we are not alone. To be able to cry helps. Music is particularly powerful in this regards. Elton John sang, ‘Sad songs say so much.’ There is truth in this. I’m not sure if God’s people ever sang bits of the book of Lamentations, I wouldn’t be surprised they did.

- How does the writer express his grief?
- What has caused it?

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God's people had experienced great loss and deep grief. When God sent them into exile it was a national tragedy which brought pain and suffering into the lives of clans, families and individuals. God inspired the book of Lamentations. It was his Spirit who moved the author to pen its tragic words. This reveals to us that God is not removed from our pain and grief. He understands it and understands its depth. In the context of God's people's loss and grief God declared: *"Comfort, comfort my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God..." (Isaiah 40.1-3)*

You may be familiar with these words as John the baptist preached them before the coming of God's king. The king who would be lasting consolation and the end to all grief. As Christians, while we grieve in this broken world, and while we know the pain of loss like every human being, we have hope that our songs of grief will turn to joy through this one who brings comfort.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, the lyrics to REM's song and the book of Lamentations expresses something we all experience in life. I want to thank you that you are no stranger to grief and loss. You know the pain we feel, you understand the depths of grief that can overcome us. Thank you that you are a God of consolation. Thank you for the promise that one day in the Lord Jesus' presence all tears will be wiped away. Thank you that on that day our song will be one of deep, satisfying and lasting joy. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

READ: Isaiah 40.1-5

"Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

REFLECT: God's chosen people experienced the national tragedy of the exile. They didn't listen to their God and they were incapable of following his ways. Their sin led God to punishing them with a new type of enslavement in a foreign land. In many ways this was worse than their slavery under Pharaoh. It is one thing to never have God on your side, it is another thing to have had God on your side and then for him to turn aside from you. Nothing could be more tragic. Isaiah however gives hope in this tragic situation.

- What does God say to his people who have experienced the exile?
- How will their grief be comforted?

Israel's experience of the exile must have made many people to question whether it was all over for them and God. Perhaps you have had the thought that God would never welcome you back. The wonderful news is that God is into fresh starts.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, although your people had turned away from you and you had punished them, you still had a good future prepared for them. I thank you that you are a God who gives fresh starts.

READ: Matthew 5.4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

READ: Luke 19:41-42

“As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you.”

READ: John 11:33-36

“When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him (Lazarus)?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!””

REFLECT: We have been thinking about those who mourn and grieve. Our Lord knows what it is to feel loss.

- How does Jesus react to Jerusalem’s rejection of God’s purposes?
- What will be the result of their rejection of Jesus?

God had brought back his people from exile, yet the return to the promise land never really reached the glorious heights that the prophets had promised. There was to be an even bigger better future ahead. This was to come though the Lord Jesus. However the leadership of God’s people refused to believe in God’s good purposes for them in Jesus. Their continual rejection of God grieved Jesus and caused him to weep. God’s work in judgement is described in Isaiah as being his ‘strange’ work (Isaiah 28). When God brings about judgement on wilful, continual sin, he finds not pleasure in it, rather it grieves him.

Consider the second passage.

- How does Jesus react confronted with the grief of Mary?
- How did Jesus react when in the presence of Lazarus, his friend, who had died?

Jesus’ reaction to Lazarus’ death and to Mary’s grief is surprising.

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It is surprising for us because Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Yet he still felt grief and sorrow. Why is that? The words ‘he was moved in spirit and troubled’ help us to understand more fully what was going on for him. The word can be used of a horse when it expulses air from its nostrils. When the word is applied to a human being it expresses a deep revulsion mixed with indignation. In other words not only was Jesus grieved at Lazarus’ death and felt Mary’s pain, he was also angry at what caused his death. Jesus knows that death is the result of people’s rejection of his heavenly father. A rejection which has no justification and is an abomination to him. Jesus is angry therefore at the root cause behind death which is human sin. As Jesus mourns he is aware that the pain and the suffering ultimately goes back to human rejection of God. As Christians therefore it is right that we mourn when we see the manifestation of sin in our own lives and in the world around us. It is an intruder which should not have its place in God’s good creation.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, it ought to grieve and upset me that I don’t love you and honour as I ought. Please forgive me. It ought to also grieve me that you are not given the glory due to you in the world. Please help me to be zealous for your name, grieve when sin is manifest and react like Jesus did when people reject you for no good reason. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

READ: Jeremiah 31:13

“I will turn their mourning into gladness, I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.”

REFLECT: God is a God of consolation who knows how to turn grief to joy. Yet even after the exile and the return to the land Simeon and other believers still longed for the consolation of Israel.

As Christians we have found consolation knowing that our sins are forgiven. We find comfort in the fact that God has provided his Son as the one who has turned his anger away from us. We know we are his dearly loved Children, yet we don't live lives that go from victory to victory. We still live in this present evil age with its suffering, injustice and death. We long for a better world for we are like strangers and aliens waiting to be with our heavenly father.

Those who have this perspective on life mourn the sad state of our world, we grieve over the lostness of people and we long for the day when all things will be put right.

Paul was able to write to the Philippian Christians, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit...”

We know the comfort that comes from understanding God's love for us, so we do not grieve without hope like the world grieves. But grieve we do! As a result we have the wonderful promise of this 'beatitude' that should our grief resonate with the grief God feels concerning his world, we have the promise that consolation is coming.

- To what extent do you grieve concerning the plight of those who are lost?
- To what extent do you yearn for sin to be done away with once and for all?

PRAY: Heavenly Father, you know that this side of heaven we have mixed feelings in this world. On the one hand we are so grateful for your loving kindness to us in sending your Son to die in our place. We thank you for comfort we can find when we are faced with our sin. Yet Lord we long for a day when you will be honoured as you should be. We long for that day when all people will acknowledge you as Lord and love your way. Please help us to trust and believe in the promise you have given us that in your presence all grief and mourning will be gone eternally. Amen

WEEK of 15th-19th February

Day 1

Blessed are the meek /

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

READ: Psalm 37.1-7

“Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.

Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this:

He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.”

REFLECT: Many people today associate meekness with weakness. The person who gets walked all over and doesn't fight back. The individual who cops it without complaining. The one who has an opinion but doesn't think they are worthy to express it. These are the meek. So who wants to be meek!

Yet Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am **gentle** (*same word: meek*) and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jesus describes himself as being ‘meek’. For the Christian this must therefore be a good thing, because anything that makes us more like Jesus is pleasing to God. Knowing that Jesus is ‘meek’ also blows out of the water the wrong idea that it has to do with being a door mat or it has to do with a lack of power. Neither of these things can be attributed to him. Jesus challenged his enemies and his power was extraordinary. So what does ‘meek’ in this context mean?

The answer lies in Psalm 37 which Jesus is most probably quoting.

We will unpack this psalm in the next few days to get a feel for who the meek are. Consider the beginning of the psalm. David acknowledges that the believer can fret and be envious of those whose success comes through dubious means.

- What does David say the believer should do faced with the ‘success’ of these evil doers?

To be ‘meek’ in this section of the Psalm is to realise that evil doers will fade like grass. It will mean doing good in the mean time, trusting in the Lord. It will mean talking to the Lord about your choices and committing them into his hands. It will mean showing self control to avoid sinning in anger against those who do evil.

- Have you ever been in the place of this psalmist, tempted to envy those who don't honour God?
- David says that evil doers are like grass and will soon wither. What encouragement is there in this to continue to live for God?

PRAY: Lord Jesus, in a world where those who have no regard for your name often prosper, enjoy power and have prestige, help me to humbly believe in your word, to love you by trusting in your ways and to delight in you and not the things my eyes might covet. Help me not to fret or become enraged against those who do evil but to wait on your good timing. Amen

Day 2

Blessed are the meek II

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

READ: Psalm 37.8-11

“Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.

For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.

But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.”

REFLECT: It seems that meekness isn't related to weakness in this Psalm. It takes a lot of self-control and strength to resist the temptation to follow those who prosper through evil. It takes resolve not to fret. The word fret describes a person whose anger has become 'hot'. This is a dangerous place to be in. The anger comes from a sense of profound injustice yet that anger unconstrained by trust in God can easily turn to vengeance and more evil.

- When have you been tempted to lash out in anger when you have experienced injustice?
- What advice does the psalmist give in those circumstances?

The injustice this psalmist experiences seems to be related to the 'land'. Five times in this psalm the author promises that those who trust in the Lord will 'inherit the land'. Perhaps those experiencing injustice have had their land taken from them or perhaps others have taken control of it. Our connection to the land can be deep! To have it taken from us, or controlled by others can arouse profound anger. Yet the Psalmist urges those who know the Lord to wait on him. We will think more about this issue of the 'land' in the next meditations.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, when I experience the hot anger of injustice, please help me not to sin. Please temper my anger by trust in you, not that I would be passive, but that I would respond in a measured way that honours you. Thank you Father for the promise that the meek will inherit the land. I understand this to be referring to the 'new land' you will give us one day in your presence. Please help me to have my heart set there. Amen

Day 3

Blessed are the meek III

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

READ: Psalm 37.12-24

“The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.

The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright.

But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.

Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked;

for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous.”

(Continue in next column)



The blameless spend their days under the Lord's care, and their inheritance will endure forever.

In times of disaster they will not wither: in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.

But the wicked will perish: Though the Lord's enemies are like the flowers of the field, they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.

The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously; those the Lord blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be destroyed.

The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.

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Day 3

Blessed are the meek III

REFLECT: We continue today to reflect on what it means to be ‘meek’ and how that is a blessing. There is a contrast in this psalm between the righteous (who are the meek) and the wicked. It is not the wicked who will inherit the land but the meek.

- Go through the verses of the Psalm above and note what the **wicked** do and what the consequences of their actions are. (Tomorrow we will do the same thing for the righteous.)

The wicked, who have wealth and power, attack those who trust in God. They seek to bring believers down. They are happy to take but they don’t give back. As a result these people are also enemies of God. However this lifestyle pitted against God and his people will only come back on their own heads. Their power will be broken, they will be consumed like flowers of the field. The psalmist declares that it doesn’t pay to ignore God and persecute his people.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, help me to remember the outcome of those who ignore you and do evil. Help me not to fret and be consumed in anger against those who might seek my downfall. Help me to have the perspective that, in the long run, those who trust in you will inherit what you have promised them. Amen

Day 4

Blessed are the meek IV

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

READ Psalm 37.12-24 a second time
NOTE what is underlined

“The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.

The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright.

But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.

Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked;

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(Continue in next column) →

The blameless spend their days under the Lord’s care, and their inheritance will endure forever.

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The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously; those the Lord blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be destroyed.

The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.

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REFLECT: Yesterday we considered the behaviour of the wicked and the outcome of their life. Today we consider the behaviour of the ‘meek’ and righteous and the outcome of their life.

- Go through the verses of the Psalm above and note what the **meek and righteous** do and what the consequences of their actions are.

The righteous don’t always have life easy. They are often persecuted by those who are wicked, who don’t know or trust the Lord. They seek to live upright lives, being generous with what they possess and as a result they are a challenge to those who live for themselves. Yet it is better to be poor and righteous, for God cares for them and he has an inheritance prepared for them which will not be taken away. This inheritance is described as inheriting the land, the place of blessing.

Christians, as they read this, can’t but help to think of heaven and the new creation. God has prepared an inheritance for those who trust him and seek to live for him. Is this the hope you have?

PRAY: Heavenly Father, you help me to realise that in this life things won’t always be easy. There are those who will be against me simply because I seek to follow your ways. Help me Father to be generous with what I have, to seek to live an upright life in your sight and to believe in the inheritance you have promised for those who trust in you. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

READ Hebrews 11.13-16

“All these people (*Abraham, Isaac, Jacob*) were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

REFLECT: The meek are those who inherit the land (the place) that God has promised them.

- According to the author of Hebrews, what land or place were the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob looking forward to?

Like the patriarchs of old, Christians look forward to an inheritance that cannot perish, spoil or fade kept in heaven for them. To be meek then is to wait on God. It is to trust him in the context of those who ignore him and give Christians a hard time. To be meek and waiting on God when all around is wickedness, injustice and exploitation is the part of the radically different lifestyle Jesus calls his disciples to.

- To what extent do you believe in the inheritance God has promised you?
- How might this stop you putting your ultimate hope in having land or a home of your own here on earth?

PRAY: Heavenly Father, I thank you for the inheritance you have given me with Christ. Thank you that you have made me a citizen of heaven. Please open my eyes to this inheritance you have prepared for those who trust in you. Amen

WEEK of 22nd-26th February

Day 1

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst I

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

REFLECT: It is such a common thing in life to be hungry and thirsty. Who hasn't experienced this in some shape and form? Parents use the expression “hangry” to describe kids or teenagers who are angry (hungry + angry) or at least grumpy because they need food! How good is it when they are satisfied.

Now of course in western society where we are very well fed and have plenty to drink, our appreciation of the intensity of hunger and thirst is poor to say the least. We simply don't know what it is to want these things desperately. Yet Jesus' words aren't directed to physical hunger and thirst, but towards the desire of desperately wanting righteousness. What does he mean?

The words righteous and justice are very closely related, so much so that in a number of contexts in the Bible they could be interchanged. For example when Christians say, ‘Jesus is our righteousness’ we could equally say, ‘Jesus is our justice.’ Understanding the close overlap of these words opens up vistas of understanding which flow from the Old Testament. We will explore these in the days to come.

If the word righteousness is closely related to justice - to putting things right - consider these questions:

- What needs to be put right in your life?
- What do you think needs to be put right in life in general?

PRAY: Dear Lord Jesus, I know you were one who hungered and thirsted for righteousness. You long for a world which would honour your heavenly Father and do what is right. Please help me in my apathy to have the same hunger you do for your Father's purposes. Amen

Day 2

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst II

READ: Matthew 5.5 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

READ: Isaiah 51:1-6

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him.

For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

“Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait.

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

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REFLECT: To pursue and desperately want righteousness! What do you think this means? Many Christians would say something like wanting to be holy, that it is about the keen personal pursuit of godliness. This is a good and appropriate thing to hunger and thirst for. However the prophet Isaiah has a bigger picture in mind when he talks about righteousness.

- From the reading above, what is Isaiah referring to when he talks about righteousness?
- What will happen when God brings righteousness to his people?

When God's righteousness comes it is a very big thing! It is associated with God's law going out and justice and salvation coming to all peoples. God's righteousness is linked to the old order of things vanishing and the joy and thanksgiving that will result. In this context thirsting for righteousness is more like longing for God's kingdom to come. It involves personal holiness, but it is more than that. It is about a time when all things will be put right, when justice will finally be done. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness long for this for themselves but they also long for this to be realised for the whole world. It is similar to those who mourn who long for God's final kingdom to be brought in. It is like saying, "Your kingdom come..."

- To what extent do you long for this type of righteousness?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, the reading from Isaiah reminds me of when you taught your disciples to pray. You taught us to say, "Your kingdom come." Help me to long for your kingdom of righteousness to come. To come into the lives of those who don't know you yet, that Jesus might become their righteousness. I think of _____ (*put in name of person who is not yet a Christian*) that they might seek Christ's righteousness and become your child. Help me also to live in a way which is right in your eyes and help me to long for that day when your righteous kingdom will be revealed in all its glory when you will have established justice in all the earth. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

READ: 2 Corinthians 5.21

"For our sake God made him (*Jesus*) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

REFLECT: Yesterday we saw that desperately wanting righteousness is linked with wanting God's kingdom to come. Yet how is it that people can participate in God's eternal kingdom of justice?

- What do the verses from 2 Corinthians say about being righteous?

Jesus was righteous in God's sight as a result of his perfect faith and complete obedience. He has a righteousness which is matched by his thoughts, speech and deeds. However all human beings, because of sin in their lives, are unrighteous. They haven't lived up to God's standards and are guilty before him. Jesus was also righteous in that he was faithful to God's purpose for him concerning us. Jesus in dying in our place became sin for us, that is he took our sin up himself, fulfilling God's justice and enabling us who are unrighteous to be declared righteous in God's sight simply by trusting in Jesus. As a result Jesus has become our righteousness. He enables us to be right in God's sight, to be declared 'just' before him. That is why the Christian lives by faith. It is faith alone in Christ alone that enables us to participate in God's eternal kingdom.

PRAY: Dear Lord Jesus, I thank you that you have become my righteousness. I thank you that you bore my sins for me when you died on the cross. You did this out of your love for me that I might participate in your righteous kingdom. Thank you. Amen

Day 4

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst IV

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

READ: Ephesians 6:14

“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness.”

READ: Galatians 5:5

“For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness”

REFLECT: So for those who trust in the Lord Jesus, is their thirst for righteousness satisfied? The answer is yes and no.

- What do the verses from Ephesians 6 and Galatians 5 say?

So much of our experience as Christians is caught up in the ‘now and the not yet’. We possess eternal life now, yet we await for the full experience of that life in the future. We belong to the kingdom now by faith, yet we await for it to be revealed in glory. We have a ‘breastplate of righteousness’ which allows us to stand despite the accusations of the evil one (Ephesians 6.14), yet we wait for the ‘hope of righteousness’ (Galatians 5.5).

There is a sense in which we can find satisfaction in that we are God’s dearly loved children, right in his sight, yet on the other hand we remain dissatisfied by our sin, the lack of honour that our Lord receives in this world and the injustice that goes with that.

PRAY: Dear Lord Jesus, I thank you that you have become my righteousness. I thank you that you bore my sins for me when you died on the cross. You did this out of your love for me that I might participate in our righteous kingdom. Thank you. Amen

Day 5

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst V

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

READ: Revelation 7.15-17

“Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

REFLECT: Mick Jagger famously sang, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” To be satisfied is good because it brings contentment and peace. Yesterday we thought about how Christians have this twin experience of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the world. We find great satisfaction in knowing we are loved by God and are his dearly loved Children, yet we are rightly dissatisfied by sin in our lives and the fact that so many people don’t know the Lord or live for him. The hope we have however is that the sense of dissatisfaction we experience because of sin will one day disappear.

- John has a wonderful vision of those who are saved finally in God’s presence. What will their experience of hunger and thirsting be like?

It is hard to imagine what it will be like to be completely satisfied and content in the Lord’s presence. Have you pondered what life would be like with the dissatisfaction removed?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, what a marvellous hope you have called us to. It is hard to imagine being in your presence and being completely satisfied. Yet that is what you promise me. Help me to believe and long for this hope you have given me and help me to share what I know with others. Amen

WEEK of 1st-5th March

Day 1	Blessed are the merciful I
<p>READ: Matthew 5.5</p> <p>“Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: We are starting to build up an idea of the person who is blessed by God. They are someone who knows of their spiritual need (poor in spirit), they feel grief at their own sin and that of the world around them (those who mourn), they desire for God’s kingdom of justice to come (they hunger and thirst for righteousness). We can now add another aspect to what this ‘blessed’ person is like. They are merciful.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you think it means to be merciful?• How does someone get this quality? <p>As we think about mercy it is worth comparing it to grace. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve and mercy is not getting what you do deserve. In other words someone being merciful is someone who has been wronged. Yet if the person is being merciful they choose not to make the wronger doer pay. That is mercy. We are going to think about this quality and where it comes from in the next 4 days. Today why not consider these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When was the last time you were wronged and decided to show mercy?• If you have shown mercy to someone who has wronged you, why did you do that? <p>PRAY: Heavenly Father, how hard it is to show mercy when I have been wronged. You know I desire to be apologised to, I desire that the person who has wronged me pay for what they have done. Yet I know you are not like that with me. Please help me to be merciful as you are merciful. Amen</p>
Day 2	Blessed are the merciful II
<p>READ: Matthew 5.5</p> <p>“Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”</p> <p>READ: Exodus 20.5-6</p> <p>“I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, bringing the consequences of the fathers’ iniquity on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: Yesterday we started thinking about being merciful and we wondered about where the quality of being merciful comes from. Consider the passage from Exodus.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does God reveal about himself here?• How might this relate to mercy? <p>Consider the passage from Exodus. God is a jealous God! We can struggle here to conceive of God being a jealous God, how does that fit with his love and what has it got to do with mercy?</p> <p>Part of our difficulty is the fact that, in English we mix up the words envy and jealousy. You might look on Facebook, someone posts a picture of their big breakfast and you have 'breakfast envy.' Envy is when you don’t have something someone else has and you want it for yourself. It’s related to coveting.</p> <p>Continued on next page...</p>

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Jealousy on the other hand is when you have something and you don't want to lose it. Jealousy can be a good thing. A recently married wife might become annoyed and jealous if her husband is spending all of his time with his mates and none of it with her. It is normal and healthy that she feels this way. This is good jealousy. Now of course human jealousy can lead to sin, manipulation and all sorts of evil. When God is jealous, he is not jealous of us, fearful or manipulative, rather he is jealous in regards to his relationship with us. His jealousy expresses his desire for a relationship with us which is exclusive. A relationship where our allegiance and loyalty to him matches his allegiance and loyalty to us. When we don't treat God like this and we put other things in his rightful place, his jealousy is aroused.

- What does God do when people turn away from him and sin?

When people don't treat God for who he is, his anger and jealousy are aroused and he punishes. This is a function of his justice. He can't let the guilty go free. However he shows love to a thousand generations of those who relate to him as he is. God's love in the Old Testament is closely related to his mercy. He punishes injustice to the 3rd and 4th generation, but he loves and shows mercy to the 1000th generation. In other words God's love and mercy trump his justice and retribution. He is full of love and mercy. He is **merciful**. The result of this is that if we are to be like God we will show mercy too.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, you are a jealous God and when I turn away from you and trust in other things other than in you, your anger is rightly aroused. Please forgive me for times when I have not treated you as God in my life. I am so glad that your mercy trumps your justice in my regards. Thank you for having mercy on me a sinner and please help me to show mercy to others as you do. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”

READ: Hosea 6.6

“For I desire faithful love (*mercy*) and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

REFLECT: To be merciful is a characteristic of God. If God wasn't like this sinners would have absolutely no hope before him.

- What does God desire for his people?
- Why does God say he would rather have mercy than sacrifice?

God's people of old were like an adulterous wife. They kept turning away from God to trust in other 'gods' who could never save them, provide for them or satisfy them. Yet it wasn't as if God's people had abandoned all religion. They still performed their religious rituals, but their hearts were far from God. They did their external observances all the while committing evil against their fellow Israelites. Their religion was empty for they did not show love and mercy like God does. As a result the time had come to no longer show mercy to his people. God punished them and exiled them to a foreign land. However, God's mercy prevailed again for he remains true to his character. He brought them back from exile he had mercy yet again. It is in God's character to show mercy and his Children will likewise be like him.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, please help me not to be simply 'religious', but to love mercy and to act with kindness even to those who wrong me. Please help me to be more like you. Amen

Day 4

Blessed are the merciful IV

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”

READ: Matthew 9.12-13

“While Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came to eat with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Now when he heard this, he said, “It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: **I desire mercy and not sacrifice.** For I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners.””

REFLECT: People who think they are right before God through their religious practices or through their good works can struggle to show mercy.

- How is this evident amongst the Pharisees at the time of Jesus?
- How does Jesus respond to them?
- What did the Pharisees need to learn?
- How did Jesus’ understanding of mercy reveal itself in his life?

Fundamental to getting into a right relationship with God is knowing that we need mercy. To think we can be right with God by our good works or our religious observance undercuts God’s mercy and removes it as an important aspect of our thinking. However when we know we need mercy and have been shown mercy we will tend to relate to others with mercy and not judgementalism. The Pharisees didn’t understand this and therefore didn’t show mercy to others, rather they judged them seeing themselves as being superior.

- To what extent do you think you need mercy from God?
- How does this affect the way you view others?

PRAY: Heavenly Father, I thank you for Jesus who came, not to call the righteous but sinners. I am a sinner who needs mercy and I praise you that you are therefore a God of great mercy. I struggle sometimes to show mercy, please help me not to judge but to extend your forgiveness to others who need it like I do. Amen

Day 5

Blessed are the merciful V

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”

READ: Matthew 6.12-13

“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

REFLECT: Mercy and forgiveness are intimately related. When you show someone mercy for a wrong they have committed, you don’t require that they get what they deserve, especially if you have power or authority over them. This is mercy. When you forgive someone, you don’t hold against them the debt they owe you, you let it go.

- God has forgiven our debts, what should we do to those who have sinned against us?
- If we refuse to forgive, what will be the consequences?

To be merciful is to be ready to forgive. It is a state of mind and will where you are open to the relationship being restored. It is important to not get confused here. Forgiveness can be offered but trust is earned. Therefore in human relationships forgiving someone doesn’t mean that trust will be immediately restored. Trust needs to be rebuilt. The onus of restoring trust lies with the person you have forgiven but who broke your trust. A person who is genuinely sorry for their wrong doing will seek to do what they can to restore the relationship.

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So both forgiveness and rebuilding of trust is required for repairing human relationships. With God it is a little different. God doesn't need to trust us, he knows what is in our hearts already. Rather he forgives us and restores our relationship to him completely. It is we who need to learn to trust this free forgiveness he offers and to know we have peace with God.

The great application arising from God's mercy and forgiveness is that we must be prepared to forgive others. This can take time, but with God's help through the Holy Spirit it is possible. Therefore those who show mercy are those who receive mercy for they truly know God and God works in their lives to transform them more into his likeness.

- Is there someone you need to show mercy to, to be prepared to forgive?

PRAY: Heavenly Father, forgiving can sometimes be very hard, almost impossible. Please work that miracle in my heart such that I might be prepared to let go of the hurt others do to me or have done to me. Please help me to forgive and show mercy as you have shown me mercy. Please help in regards to _____ (*place name of someone who has hurt you*) that you might help me to show mercy and be willing to forgive. Amen

WEEK of 8th-12th March

Day 1	Blessed are the pure in heart I
<p>READ: Matthew 5.5</p> <p>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: We keep building up an idea of the person who is blessed by God. Without reading the next paragraph can you remember the 5 characteristics (beatitudes) that we have already considered of the person who is blessed by God?</p> <p>How did you go? Here is a recap: We have seen that the person God blesses is someone who knows of their spiritual need (<i>poor in spirit</i>), they feel grief at their own sin and that of the world around them (<i>those who mourn</i>), they desire for God's kingdom of justice to come (<i>they hunger and thirst for righteousness</i>), they are prepared to forgive and not pay back the wrong they suffered (<i>they show mercy</i>), and today we see they are pure in heart.</p> <p>Wow! Pure in heart, how in the world is this possible? Especially given that the first characteristic of the blessed person is that they are poor in spirit quite aware of their own sin! Who will ever be able to face God and see him without shame? Again we will have to dive into the Old Testament to build up a picture of what Jesus is talking about.</p> <p>Purity is definitely a quality you want in certain spheres of life. You delight to drink pure water free of contamination. You enjoy breathing pure air and not the smog of the diesel particles ever present in the big cities. You love to be in a relationship with someone who has no hidden agenda, but whose motives are pure.</p> <p>In this 'beatitude' Jesus is expressing something of God's character.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Continued on next page...</p>

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God is holy, set-apart and perfect in character and justice. To be in God's presence requires purity because God is a consuming fire and cannot live in the presence of evil or sin. He consumes that which is impure.

- Would you consider your thoughts to contain 'impurities', things you would be ashamed others found out about? Most people would!

This 'beatitude' then, taken without any further reference to God's work and revelation would ban all people (except the Lord Jesus) from ever seeing God. Yet we know that the Bible speaks of others who will see God and be in his presence. It is possible to have this pure heart. So how does this happen and how do you get it? We will reflect on this in the next 4 days.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that, like pure water or fresh air, you are absolutely pure in love and justice. There is no hint of corruption or immorality in you whatsoever. Yet I am a sinner who has impure thoughts and mixed motives. Forgive me. Thank you that you give me hope that I might one day be in your presence and see you for you are able to change my heart and make it pure. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

READ: Isaiah 6.5

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

READ: Psalm 24.1-4

Of David. A psalm.

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?

The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god."

REFLECT: The prophet Isaiah received a vision of the Lord and his reaction was fear and dread. He had seen the holy one, come into his presence and he believed he would be consumed.

- How does Isaiah describe his situation?

Isaiah feared having come into God's presence for he and his people had unclean (impure) lips. To understand this and the beatitude of Jesus it is helpful to know the word translated as 'pure' can also be translated as 'clean'. This is how the Jewish disciples would have heard it. This opens up for us a whole world of thought related to the Jewish 'religious' practices of the first century.

In Jewish thought there were three main categories or states you could be in in life 1) Holy 2) Clean or 3) Unclean. To approach God who is Holy in the temple you had to be clean first of all. The normal 'ritual' or 'religious' state of the great majority of Jews most of the time was 'clean'. However certain things could render you 'unclean'. Eating certain products (banned foods) would do that. Touching a dead body - human or animal - would do the same. Contracting certain diseases or having bodily discharges could render you 'unclean'. To become 'clean' again you had to go through ritual purification by washing or offering a sacrifice. It was time consuming and costly. So most Jews would avoid becoming 'unclean' as it would hamper them coming close to God in the temple. This way of life constantly reminded a Jew that God was Holy and to approach him required being clean (pure). It seemed that if you just followed the external rules you would be fine. However the concept of Holy/Clean/Unclean went deeper than simply external religious practices.

- Consider Psalm 24. What does it say about being clean or pure?

The similar theme of being pure or clean is present in this Psalm. However the concept goes deeper than simple external ritual. To see God requires a pure (clean) heart.

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It seems that having a pure/clean heart relates to trusting the one true God and not putting your hope in a false god, an idol. So a pure heart is about being in a right relationship with the God who made you and treating him as your God. This was a constant problem for God's people, they keep turning away from him to trust in idols, man-made gods. They replaced God with a lie of their own making.

- In what ways are you tempted to trust in 'false gods' in your life? (*A false god can be anything that gives you purpose, meaning, security over and above the God who loves you and made you.*)

On our journey reflecting on this beatitude we still haven't got to thinking about how we can have a pure heart. It is possible! We are just building up the background to understand this saying of Jesus and its richness for us. We'll get closer to this in the next few days.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, I know it makes no sense to trust in other 'so called gods', yet how often do I forget to trust you and I place my meaning, security and hopes in other things over and above you. Please forgive me and help me to know that in Jesus I have all that I need. Amen

Day 3

Blessed are the pure in heart III

READ: Matthew 5.5

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

READ: Ezekiel 36.22-27

"I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God."

REFLECT: They say a leopard can't change its spots and one might be tempted to say, "Who can change the human heart?" The answer the Bible gives is that God can.

To be able to see God we need a pure/clean heart and this is something only God can give us. In the reading from Ezekiel, God speaks to his people who were unable to 'change their spots'. They were incapable of living for him and they had been banished from his presence into exile. Yet God was going to do a great work in their life.

- What does Ezekiel say the Sovereign Lord would do?

God promised to do a mighty work in the future to purify his people, to cleanse their hearts. As he did this, it would be like a great home coming and it would be brought about by the work of God's Spirit. This great home coming and cleansing of the heart is also described as God coming as a great good shepherd in the person of his king a new greater David (See Ezekiel 34.23-24). God coming in the person of a new Davidic king and through the powerful work of his Spirit would be a momentous new beginning for God's people. They would have cleansed hearts and therefore be able to see God.

- To what extent do you believe that God can change your heart? Have you turned to him to do this work in you?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that you are able to change the human heart. Thank you for the power of your Spirit which was poured out when the new greater David, Jesus, took up his heavenly rule. Please help me to trust in him. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

READ: Matthew 23.25-26

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

READ: John 13.4-11

“...so Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus replied, “You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.”

REFLECT: We have seen that only God can change the human heart and cleanse it. Religious ritual and ceremony is absolutely powerless to bring about the change of heart that is required to be able to see God.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, made this fatal mistake. They thought that religious external observance would suffice to be able to see God. Do the right thing and you’ll be right! Wrong!

- What does Jesus say must happen first?

So the human heart needs to be made clean/pure to be able to see God. Jesus gives a clue as to how this comes about. Consider Jesus’ words to his disciples in the reading from John’s gospel.

- Do you see any clues as to how the disciples (except Judas Iscariot) are clean?

Peter feels it is inappropriate that his master should clean his feet when this was a job for a servant or slave. Jesus however shows the nature of his rule and kingship. He is a servant king. In doing this Jesus also declares that his disciples are clean (or pure). How does this happen? It happens through association with Jesus. Jesus said unless I do this you have no part with me. In other words it is by being in relationship with Jesus, trusting in his words and actions that someone can be clean. Jesus’ action of cleansing here is something the disciples didn’t understand immediately but something they would understand later. The reference to ‘later’ refers to the time after Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is by trusting in Jesus’ death on our behalf and his resurrection from the dead that we are cleansed, that we become ‘pure’ in God’s sight. This ‘purity’ then is more about our status with God and our ability to approach him than having all our thoughts cleansed and pure. We remain sinners until we are in the Lord’s presence, but because of Christ’s death on our behalf and our association with him through faith, we are those who have now been purified from all sin.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that through Jesus’ death and through the gift of your Spirit that enables me to trust in Jesus and be united to him, I am now cleansed of my sins. Jesus has taken them for me, and as you said to your disciples who trusted in you, I am clean in your sight. Thank you father for doing this work in me that I could not do myself. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

READ: Hebrews 10.19-22

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. “

REFLECT: We have seen that by trusting in Jesus and being united to him through trusting in his word and by his Spirit we are ‘clean’ in God’s sight, we have been made pure. God has changed our hearts and we now want to live for him.

This doesn’t mean that there is now no more sinful or impure thoughts that arise within us, rather we can approach God with confidence and have the sure and certain hope of seeing him in his presence.

- How does the writer to the Hebrews describe the confidence Christians can have?

This is the heart of the Christian message, that through Jesus’ death, our sinful, unclean hearts no longer prevent us from being able to see God or be in his presence. Our sins have been paid for and removed. God has dealt with the heart of our problem which is our human heart.

Once we understand that God is interested in our hearts, our inner life, we can abandon the pretence of religion and the pretence of do goodism. Many think that the blessed people are those who look good externally and play by the rules, religious or otherwise. God however cuts through this facade. It ought to also stop us pretending that we have it all together and trusting in our supposed good deeds or our religious performance. It is by coming to Christ, acknowledging our need and being united to him in faith that enables us to have the great hope of seeing God.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, you cut through the pretence of my human pride and you reveal the emptiness of superficial religious practice. Please help me to trust in Christ and Christ alone as the basis of my right standing before you. I thank you that by your Spirit you have united me to Christ and united me to his perfect. Help me to acknowledge my sin and depend on him. Amen

WEEK of 15th-19th March

Day 1	Blessed are the peacemakers I	
<p>READ: Matthew 5.5</p> <p>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: We have been developing a picture of the person who is blessed by God. We come now to another characteristic of that person, it is that they will be peacemaker.</p> <p>As I write this there has been significant unrest in the USA surrounding Biden’s election and Trump’s refusal to concede defeat. It is concerning, will there be peace? Yet this is not the only hot spot of a lack of peace in our world today. If you look at the map of on going armed conflicts in the world it covers about a quarter of the countries. We don’t seem to be very good at bringing peace. The same is true in our neighbourhoods, how many conflicts go on over the fence and even in our families, who hasn’t experienced conflict in their family to some extent.</p> <p>What does Jesus mean when he talks about being peacemakers. Is he aiming at simply the absence of conflict, is there something else involved?</p> <p>Again we will have to dive into the Old Testament as this is the background that Jesus is drawing on when he talks about peacemakers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How good are you at being a peacemaker?• If you know anything of the Old Testament, what background do you think Jesus is drawing on? <p>It seems that to be a peacemaker is a family trait, for those who are like this will be called ‘sons of God.’</p> <p>PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, to be called a ‘son (or daughter of God) is to reflect in some way your character. I see from this that you are a God of peace who creates peace. I ask that as I reflect on what it means to be a peacemaker that you would help me to understand. I also ask that not only will I understand but that you would help me to be the type of peacemaker that reflects your character. Amen</p>	
Day 2	Blessed are the peacemakers II	
<p>READ: Matthew 5.5</p> <p>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”</p> <p>READ: Ezekiel 37.24-27</p> <p>“My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: As modern people we tend to think of peace as being the absence of war or conflict. However the Biblical idea of peace is much broader than that. For the Israelite peace was not simply the absence of conflict, it was when life was lived as it was supposed to be lived under God. It was about well-being, safety and prosperity. It was about living with God in the place God had established for his people.</p> <p>The high point of peace in Israel’s life was during the reigns of David and Solomon. David had subdued the enemies of God’s people around them and Solomon ushered in a golden time of peace in the land.</p> <p>Continued on next page...</p>	

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However that wholistic view of peace, of not only absence of conflict from enemies, but of living in the land, being in security and prosperity was only short lived. Israel's constant turning away from God led the nation to being divided, to civil war and decline. The communal life of 'shalom', peace, didn't turn out to be a lasting reality. As we have seen constantly through these meditations, God's people were punished and sent into exile. Yet the end of that short lived 'peace' for God's people wasn't the end of God's promises to bring lasting peace.

- In the reading from Ezekiel above what does God promise to do for his people and how is it related to peace?

God was going to bring back his people to himself and establish an everlasting covenant of peace. Unlike the short lived experience of peace under David and Solomon this was going to be an everlasting reality for God's people. It was going to be achieved through God's king David. Ezekiel is referring to a new greater David like figure for David was long dead. This prophecy points to the Lord Jesus, the prince of peace, who would establish a new covenant of peace.

How does all this relate to people becoming 'peacemakers'. We need to think further about that in the next few meditations.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that you are a God of peace and that you have promised peace and will bring it about. I thank you that the starting point of all true and lasting peace is with you. Help me to learn from the peace that you desire between people and yourself and each other. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

READ: John 14.27

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

READ: Romans 5.1, 10

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..."

...For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

REFLECT: The prince of peace. That is how Isaiah called the great figure who was to come from Isaiah chapter 9. As Christians we believe the great prince of peace has come - the Lord Jesus. Jesus has established a new covenant of peace. He has come to cleanse us from our sins, to bring salvation and to establish an everlasting kingdom of safety and well being. His peace is not like the world's peace - a truce established for a short time - it is eternal and restores relationships.

- Consider the Romans passage. What type of peace comes to us by faith?

God makes peace with us - his enemies - by paying for our sins. He comes to us who were in rebellion against him, not wanting to live for him, and he changes our hearts and reconciles us to himself. He justifies us. That is, by trusting in Jesus' death on our behalf, he gives us a status of being right in his sight, his dearly loved children. The result of this 'vertical' relationship being restored is that God helps us to restore our horizontal relationships.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for justifying me in your sight such that I now have peace with you. Thank you for having reconciled me to yourself and for the peace that comes from knowing you have saved me. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

READ: Ephesians 2:14-15

“...now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

REFLECT: The Lord Jesus, by our trust in his death, reconciles us to God and brings peace. This peace is brought about by God’s forgiveness to all sinners who call upon his name.

The marvellous thing about this is that it puts all people on a level footing. We have all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. This is true for Jewish people as well as for non-jewish people. There is no room for pride which often causes barriers between people.

Even though God’s historic people, the Jews, had the privilege of having God’s law and were those to whom God had first made his promises, they just like Gentiles (non-Jews), were sinners. They needed the Lord Jesus just as much as the Gentiles did. The law of God, which they possessed, did nothing to bring them peace with God. The law of God rather condemned them for they were incapable of fulfilling it. The same is true of Gentiles. They did not have the privilege of having God’s written law, and they too were incapable of loving God with all their heart and loving their neighbour as themselves. When this is recognised by people and they turn to the sole means of being right with God through faith in the death of Christ, this makes barriers of division fall. Every person who trusts in Christ has access to God the Father through the one Spirit. This means they become Children of God no matter what their background or what they have done. The cross of Christ has the power to bring peace between people.

- Look the Ephesian passage, what was God’s purpose in abolishing the law of Moses as the means to come near to God?

Knowing that you are a sinner, just like everyone else, in desperate need of forgiveness to be saved, tends to remove pride which so often separates human beings. The Jews may have been proud of having God’s law, but that pride ought to have vanished realising they were incapable of fulfilling it.

One of the marvellous things about the Gospel of the Lord Jesus is that it is able to bring peace between people who were separated and even hostile towards each other. Those who have received forgiveness from God tend to seek to forgive others and this brings healing and reconciliation. They become peacemakers, just like God is a peacemaker.

- Is there someone you need to forgive in your heart? Are you asking God to help you to let go of the hurt you feel?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that you are making one new humanity through the cross of your Son. I realise I am a sinner not deserving your mercy, yet you have had mercy on me. Please help me to remove the pride in my heart which doesn’t promote peace, help me to be a peacemaker by relying on Jesus and pointing others to him. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.5

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

READ: Romans 12:17-19

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.”

REFLECT: So we come to the last meditation on being peacemakers or ‘sons of God’. How would you recap what it means to be a ‘son/child of God’?

Firstly those who seek to be part of God’s kingdom will commit themselves to being people of peace. They will be part of God’s family for they are ‘sons’, ‘children’ of the same family. They will be part of the family of ‘peace’ who have peace with God and therefore peace with each other.

Secondly they will seek to have the family likeness of God who is the one who brings us peace and promises us perfect peace in his kingdom. This means that those who belong to God’s family will display the family likeness of God in seeking to be peacemakers.

This will be displayed in having a heart for the lost, praying that they might find peace with God and taking opportunities to share the Gospel which brings peace. It will be also displayed in having an attitude and orientation which works towards peace in human relationships.

- How does the passage from Romans encourage you to seek peace?

Peacemakers will be realistic, knowing that creating peace takes two willing people. In a sinful world when one person doesn’t want to seek peace or make efforts in that direction it is impossible to find peace. The peacemaker will nevertheless seek to take the initiative to repair things where possible and to not stand on their rights. This is the radical kingdom lifestyle that God calls his children to.

- Where are you tempted to stand on your rights in a relationship? Where might you need to take the initiative?
- Is there an area where you need to be realistic and realise that despite your efforts peace may not be able to be always obtained?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, as your child you call me to seek to live in harmony, as much as I can, with all people. Help me to take the initiative to repair things where possible. Help me to be humble and not demand my rights. Help me to trust you when another may not want reconciliation. Please keep me from revenge that I may honour you for your glory. Amen

WEEK of 22nd-26th March

Day 1

Blessed are the persecuted I

READ: Matthew 5.10-12

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

REFLECT: Blessed are those who are popular for they are loved by so many. Blessed are those who are spoken well of, who are acclaimed and who are praised in public for they will have their name established. Blessed are those who follow the latest fashion and public opinion for they are free and up-to-date!

- How does what Jesus say relate to the popularity that people so often crave in life?
- To what extent are you concerned about what people think of you?
- How does this fit in with what Jesus says?

In many ways this final ‘beatitude’ of Jesus is a fitting one. To live out the kingdom lifestyle as Jesus outlines it will put you at odds with the world. Your values will be radically different. What you live for will challenge others and make them feel uncomfortable. You will, like Jesus, be persecuted. The flip side of this of course is that if we feel no opposition by the world we need to ask ourselves the question of whether we are really living for Jesus!

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, you know how I often crave the praise and acclamation of others around me. I want to be liked and popular. I don’t want rejection or insults, yet you tell me that to live for you will sometimes me this will come my way. Please help me Father to want to please you first and not others around me. Amen

Day 2

Blessed are the persecuted II

READ: Matthew 5.10-12

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

READ: Jeremiah 5.10-12

“O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

For I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! “Denounce him! Let us denounce him!” say all my close friends, watching for my fall. “Perhaps he will be deceived; then we can overcome him and take our revenge on him.”

But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause.”

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REFLECT: The Lord gave Jeremiah a ministry that led to persecution. He spoke the truth to God's people about what God was about to do. It was a message that spoke of God's people's sin and their need to repent, however his message was hated and he was hated as the one who brought it. Even though God had sent him, God's people threatened to kill him, trying on one occasion to starve him to death.

- How does Jeremiah initially react to his persecution?
- Where does Jeremiah place his hope?

The curious thing about Jeremiah, is that he was hated in his day, but later revered as a prophet. His message was read in the synagogues and upheld by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees and teachers of the law persecuted Jesus all the while reading and revering Jeremiah. The irony is that Jesus was doing the same thing that Jeremiah was doing, calling people to repent and turn back to God, something the Pharisees didn't think they needed to do, just as God's people in Jeremiah's day didn't think they needed to do either!

- Why do you think people hate to be told they are sinners and need to repent?

A sure fire way of avoiding persecution is to avoid talking about people's need to repent and be forgiven. However this would be to suppress the truth and completely misunderstand why Jesus came into the world.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, help me to love people such that I don't avoid the subject of sin. I know that you came into the world to save sinners, of which I am one. Please help me to speak the truth in love, that those who don't know you need to repent. Help me to do that even if it makes me unpopular. Amen

READ: Matthew 5.10-12

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

READ: Luke 12.4-7

"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."

REFLECT: Jesus understood the dynamic which is behind what drives us to be popular and liked. It is often fear. We fear what people will say about us or do to us. We can be tempted to follow the crowd and not rock the boat.

- What does Jesus say about the fear we may have of other people?
- How does Jesus relativise this fear?

Jesus knows what we are like and he doesn't tell us to simply stop fearing other people! Rather he replaces the fear we might have of others with a greater fear. We ought to fear God above what others might do to us.

The curious thing in this passage is that while Jesus says we ought to fear God first and foremost, at the end of the day God is also a God who cares for us in all the consequences that might flow when we decide to put him first. He controls our lives and cares for us. At the end of the day we are not to fear then, for God will look after us.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, help me to fear you more than other people. Help me to put you first despite what others might think. Thank you that in your sovereign care you know all the outcomes of my life. Please help me to trust you. Amen

Day 4

Blessed are the persecuted IV

READ: Matthew 5.10-12

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

REFLECT: The Bible contains challenging statements.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of various kinds!” “The first will be last and the last will be first!” Or concerning our subject of persecution, “Rejoice and be glad!”

- How do you think we are supposed to understand what Jesus says about rejoicing in this passage?

Just like there is no virtue in suffering in and of itself, there is no virtue in persecution in and of itself. That would be a form of masochism.

Rather the rejoicing comes from the knowledge that this is a sign of being a true Child of God. It is a mark that God has given us the kingdom. It also reveals that a person is truly free, free to not have to slavishly follow what others demand they do. They are free to serve God. As the saying goes, “Even a dead dog can swim with the tide. It takes someone who is alive and free to swim against it.”

- In what ways are you living for the kingdom and being different to the world around you? Has this brought you misunderstanding even rejection from those who don’t follow Jesus as Lord?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, help me to know that when persecution comes my way for following you that it is a sign that you have given me the kingdom. What a marvellous hope. Please help me Father to long for that reward of being in your presence. Amen

Day 5

Blessed by God

READ: Matthew 5.10-12

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

REFLECT: We have finished our meditations in the ‘beatitudes’. What we have seen are a set of values or characteristics that describe the person who is living for Christ’s kingdom. These values are radically different to the values and lifestyle of the world that does not know or trust Jesus. There is something marvellous in these ‘beatitudes’. The passive voice, “they will be given this or that” really describes what God will give them.

- God through the ‘beatitudes’ again and consider what God gives to those who follow Jesus and live for the kingdom.

God will give them kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted eternally, they will be satisfied in his presence, they will be shown mercy, God will allow them into his presence and they will be his children.

- To what extent do these kingdom values represent your life? Do you long for the things God gives to those who follow Jesus?

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father, by your Spirit please help me to live out the radically different lifestyle you call me to. Help me to know that you give the kingdom to those who trust in Jesus and seek to follow him. Amen